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ABSTRACT

This paper, a summary of a multi-carousel slide presentation, reviews literature on the cultures, religions, and art of African people. Before focusing on West Africa, highlights of the lifestyles, religions, and icons of non-maskmaking cultures of North, West and South African people are presented. Clarification of West African religious concepts of God, spirits, and magic and an examination of the forms and functions of ceremonial headgear (masks, helmets, and headpieces) and religious statues (ancestral figures, reliquaries, shrine figures, spirit statues, and fetishes) are made. An explanation of subject matter, styles, design principles, aesthetic concepts and criteria for criticism are presented in cultural context. Numerous examples illustrated similarities and differences in the world views of West African people and European Americans. The paper closes with a description of the influence of West African art on the art of Europe and Americas, and a listing of African-American artists who produce works in an Afro-centric genre. Western derivatives of African art listed include cubism and intellectual primitivism, emotional primitivism, subconscious primitivism, romantic primitivism, the child cult, primitivism in modern art, Dada, surrealism, expressionism and abstract expressionism, action painting, environmental art, Naif art, and the art of many listed artists in the Afro-centric area and in naive, visionary, intuitive, and folk art. A 16-item bibliography is included. (DK)

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A General Survey of Religious Concepts and Art of North, East, South and West Africa

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Abstract

This paper is a summary of a multi-carousel slide presentation made at the National Art Education Association conference in Kansas City, 1990. It reviews literature on the cultures, religions and art of African people. Before focusing on West Africa, the paper highlights the life styles, religions and icons of non-maskmaking cultures of North, West and South African people. Next it clarifies West African religious concepts of god, spirits, and magic; then examines the forms and functions of ceremonial headgear (masks, helmets and headpieces) and religious statues (ancestral figures, reliquaries, shrine figures, spirit statues and fetishes). An explanation of subject matter, styles, design principles, aesthetic concepts and criteria for criticism are presented in cultural context. Numerous examples illustrated similarities and differences in the world views of West African people and European-Americans. The paper closes with a description of the influence of West African art on the art of Europeans and Americans, and a listing of African-American artists who produce works in an Afro-centric genre.

North Africa

Life Style: Urban dwellers, peasant farmers and nomads; Non-maskmaking cultures

Religion: Moslem. The Islamic religion dates from the 7th century, when Muhammad articulated Gabriel's revelations of *Allah* (the one universal God). In Arabic, Islam means submitting, and Moslem means true believer. From its origin on the Arabian peninsula, the Islamic faith has spread around the world. Today, there are more than 800 million people that are Moslems. They include people of different races, nationalities and ethnic groups. The *Koran* (sacred book) proscribes how Moslems are to behave toward God and fellow human beings. It forms the basis for moral codes and secular laws. Every aspect of family life is governed by the *Sharia* (Islamic law) and *Hadiths* (traditions). Countries where the Islamic religion is practiced by the majority of their people are governed by Islamic law. There are five pillars of the faith : 1) Profession of Faith, "There is no deity but God and Muhammad was his profit"; 2) prayer five times per day; 3) fasting during daylight hours during the month of *Ramadon*; 4) giving to the poor; and 5) pilgrimage to Mecca.

Motifs: The Islamic religion is oppose to idols and idolatry; therefore, artists and craftpersons avoid representing animals and humans in religious art. Religious artistry is pursed through ornamenting and decorating the surfaces of architecture and utilitarian objects with **geometric patterns, floral patterns, calligraphy,** and **arabesque** motifs.

Principles of Design: Intricate patterns based on symmetries, overlapping, rotation, reflection, reversals, regularities in number theories, geometry and logic.

Iconographic Interpretation: An expression of the the unseen organizational structures, patterns and laws inherent in the universe; and a reminder of humans enduring relationship with the cosmos and *Allah* (God)

East Africa

Life Style: Urban dwellers, subsistence farmers and traditional nomadic herdsman; Non-maskmaking cultures

Religion: Moslem. Islam has never supplanted the ancient religions of this region. It co-exist with a host of traditional religious belief and customs. A majority of Ethiopians, however, are Coptic Christians or Jews.

Motifs: As in North African Islamic art, artistry in East Africa is expressed through creation and decoration of utilitarian objects and jewelry with geometric patterns. However, some people such the **Makonde** and **Akamba** carve souvenir statues that depict the process of changing from one form to another (e.g. human to spirit and vice versa), and other mystical aspects of life.

Iconographic Interpretation:
Makonde and Akamba spirit statues represent transmutation, the continuity and flow of spiritual energy from inside out and outside in.

South Africa

Life Style: Urban dwellers and subsistence farmers; Non mask-making cultures.

Religion: A majority are Christians;

Motifs & Interpretation: Contemporary Black South African artists blend African and European concepts and conventions. Much of the ideology expressed in

art is associated with preservation of African traditions; and oppression, injustices and liberation from white rule.

West Africa

Life Style: Urban dwellers and subsistence farmers. During the 16th Century, West African communities supported themselves through fishing, farming, hunting and gathering. Kingdoms, chiefdoms and villages (led by headmen and elders) were governed by strong emotional associations with the wisdom of ancestors. The knowledge and skills of their forebears was passed orally from generation to generation because they had no written language. Europeans described Africans as being in the first, primary or primitive stage of cultural development, that is in a state prior to development a written language. Societies that had written languages were called "civilized". Since that time the term **"primitive"** has been applied pejoratively and wrongly to all the social customs, religions, rituals, rites, traditions, architecture, technology and arts of both historic and contemporary African, Pacific Island, Austrian Aboriginal and Amerindian cultures. It no longer conveys the original meaning. Now it has the negative connotation of meaning basic, backward, crude, naive and unsophisticated.

Religions

Islam, Christianity and a host of non-holyland traditional religions co-exist in West Africa. Although the Islamic religion has been a major factor in the culture of the this region since the 11th century - and is currently professed by 50% of the people - it has never supplanted ancient religions, customs and belief systems.

God

In traditional West African religions, God is the source of all cosmological **"University Energy,"** but not a personified deity as conceived of by Jews, Christians and Moslems. This "Universal Energy," *ashe* in Yoruba, is present in natural forces and inanimate materials (metal, stone, water and objects such tools); as well as in all animated life forms (humans, animals and plants). In addition, both animate and inanimate matter have a *force vitale* (living force). ***Force Vitale*** is the belief that all things possess or are associated with non-material spirits that have their own thoughts and wills. (Scholars have abandoned the use of the term Animism to describe African religions because it does not connote the complexities of African belief systems).

The *force vitale* is similar to the Christian concept of soul in that it is immortal. But unlike the soul, *force vitale* is divisible and does not leave the earth after a person's physical death. It remains active in the affairs of the clan. It can move from one life form to another and can be reincarnated into other human being - usually of the same clan.

sunlight) against hostile or evil spirits. Practically anything can be designated or made magical by priest through rituals.

Statues are used, with and without magical substances, in rites that are connected with spirits whose assistance are being sought. There are two types of magic: that which is intended to have beneficial effects; and, sorcery, that which is intended to do harm.

Magic and sorcery succeed because the believers have faith in its potency.

One form of magic that is widely practiced in Africa is **divination,** *Ifa* in the Yoruba language. Like palm, tarot card, and tea leave reading, divination is a form of fortunetelling. Diviners "predict" the fate of clients by interpreting the relationships between figurative objects that are tossed randomly in baskets, on **divination boards** or the ground. These objects may be small bones, bits of horns, nuts, wood or metals. Some may be carved as symbolic representations of spirits, historical events or worldly activities.

Divining is similar to using the toss of a coin in deciding to do or not do something. When humans engage in such an activity, they speculate about the future. Similarly diviners (priests, witches/warlocks, sorcerers, and herbalist) engage clients in dialogues, and use reasoning, intuition, wisdom and the clients body language as guides in their consultations. Like psychological counselors, diviners pose open-ended questions and structure conversations so that clients can assess the likelihood of events and envision the consequences of actions.

Herbalists (who are referred to in some literature as "medicine men" and "witch doctors"), sometimes use divination in treating illnesses. To diagnose disorders, herbalists take medical histories and a listing of symptoms, then seek spiritual guidance, by "cast bones," before prescribing herbal remedies.

ARTWORKS AND SUBJECT MATTER

Headgear

Masks, helmets and headpieces are religio-magico-social objects, and are conceived of as the embodiment of spiritual energy; but <u>not</u> spirits themselves. Masqueraders use ritualized movement and dance to behave as though they are the incarnation of spirits. In many countries in the Western world, men, women and children also dress in costumes and act out the roles of spirits (e.g. St. Nicholas or Santa Claus, The Easter Bunny, Johnny Canoe at Jonkonnu, The Spirit of 76, Uncle Sam, Father Time and The Baby New Year, as well as kings and queens of community

festivals) in annual celebrations. Africans masquerading as spirits serve a variety of purposes in initiations and prescribed rites of passage; in ancestral and funeral ceremonies; in agrarian affairs, war, and play; and in magical rituals. Masquerades preserve the social order by reaffirming mythology, moral codes and the collective history of a people. Masquerades depict kindliness, cruelty, vanity and rage of spirits. Head gear conceals the identity of maskers, thus freeing them from inhibitions and allowing them to assume the characters of the spirits they represents.

Statues

Ancestral figures, reliquaries, shrine figures, magical statues, fetishes, musical instruments and tools, like Christian religious statuary (crucifixes, madonnas and figures of saints), are representations of spirits. They are <u>not</u> materialized spirits or objects of worship themselves. African religious statues are used in rites, rituals, ceremonies and shrines as the figurative embodiment and the abode of the *force vitale*. Spirit statues are created to represent forces of nature, totemistic animals, ancestors or supernatural beings that are not from the visible world, but from the invisible spiritual realm that human can only imagine. They are designed to inspire awe and homage of transcendent spirits. African carvers objectify these spirits through abstractions. The features, facial expressions and proportions of African statues are simplified, exaggerated and distorted to contradict visual reality. Unlike African statuary, Christian figurative icons represent the triumvirate deity, the Trinity (God the father; his son, Jesus, the Christ; and the Holy Ghost*), and saints as humans in a naturalistic style. Spirits such as angels and the demon, Satan, are represented in a quasi-naturalistic style with symbolic colors, exaggerated and stylized facial features, wings, halos, horns or tails. This kind of simple figurative embellishment is not generally used by African sculptors. Instead, sculptors represent spirits through highly abstract symbolic visual metaphors.

African statues are made from stone, ivory, terracotta, bronze, but more frequently in wood. Their sculptural forms adhere to precedents and traditions. African carvers use traditional tools, such as an ***adze,*** to copy statues from the past because the prototypes have performed their functions successfully. The key to maintaining community unity is the perpetuation of the religious magical and social traditions.

*The Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost is frequently represented as a white dove.

Fetishes

Fetishes are objects that have magical power. Western fetishes include horse shoes, rabbit feet, and lucky pennies. Fetishes may be defensive and provide protection against evil, or offensive.

Nail Figures (Konde) are fetishes created by people living in the Congo area of Zaire. These statues are imbued with special powers by magical substances in their cavities and by mirrors embedded in their bellies to reflect evil. When wishes are expressed, nails or pieces of metal are driven into statues. The power of the spirits of the metal augment the power of the Konde spirit's power to grant the wish. Nail fetishes are used in swearing oaths, to confirm social contracts, and in healing illnesses. The Afro-Latin American Voodoun (Voodoo) Doll may have been derived from the *Konde* figure.

Fertility Fetishes (*Akua'da*) are wooden dolls that are worn by women to insure fertility and the birth of healthy children.

COLOR

Colors has both meaning and spiritual power. For example, red is "Universal Energy." Anything that is red (like blood), is the physical expression of "Universal Energy." It can also represent danger. The purer and more intense the hue, the more potency it has. Noble character, purity, ancestral spirits, peace and clarity are represented by white. Black sometimes represents death, sterility, and impurity. Green is used to represent spirits of nature; and blue is associated with coolness. Coolness is good, proper, moral, and ethical behavior. A person whose behavior deserves respect is **cool**.

AESTHETIC and CRITICISM

Statues loose their spiritual and magical powers over time. When new ones are needed, sculptors copy the old ones and priest perform rituals to invest them with the spirit's powers (new statues have greater power than old ones). Statues that have lost their power and no longer perform the functions for which thy were originally created are retired to shrines, renamed or discarded

The physical appearance of spirit statues are rooted in history and tradition. Criticism of statues is considered by Africans to be a form of anti-social behavior The Yoruba for example, equate good moral character with beauty. Statues and headgear are functional objects. They serve magical, religious, social and spiritual purposes. Objects that perform their functions well are considered

beautiful. However, if urged to evaluate two statues, one well crafted, and the other poorly, a Yoruba elder, an *amewa* (a knower -of-beauty), will look for an aesthetic equilibrium, that is, a balance between extremes and opposing forces.

Cannons of Beauty

Abstract Likeness: A resemblance that is at a mid point between an absolute likeness and excessive abstraction;

Emotional Proportioning: A proportional schema that emphasizes psychological importance over reality;

The Prime of Life: A depiction of a being that balances the moral beauty of elders and the physical beauty of the youth;

Straightness, Positioning and Symmetry: Upright posture, naturalistic placement and balanced alignment of the parts of the body;

Compositional Balance: Equilibrium between the sizes and spatial arrangements of forms;

Roundness: Curvilinear forms and spherical shapes that are fully developed; (Angularity is acceptable if it accentuate the expressive impact of the work);

Clarity of Form and Line: Masses and lines that are neither too big nor too small; (Critics disapprove of thin mass and thick lines.);

Shining Smoothness: A shine on the surface of the work that accentuates highlights and shadows;

Artistry: Craftsmanship; skillful designing, carving and finishing.

AFRICA'S INFLUENCE ON WESTERN ART

West African arts has had a major influence on music, dance and the visual arts of Western cultures. Prior to the 1900's European and American artists used representational imagery as metaphors for mental concepts. For example, white doves were used to symbolize peace, compassion and love; dogs, faithfulness and loyalty, etc. Africans however, used form and color, abstractly, to express meanings. For example, hollow cylinders could be affixed to a mask as eyes to express that spirit's ability to see and behold all. Adopting the West African abstract form of expression freed Western artists from representational symbolism.

Listed below are Western derivatives of African Art. (African-American artists are listed in *italic*)

Cubism and Intellectual Primitivism: Picasso, Braque, Leger, Mandrian;

Emotional Primitivism: Emphasis on violent and basic emotions; **The Fauves** (Wild Beast), Modigliani; **The Bruche**, Nolde; **The Blue Reiter**, Chagall, Kandinsky, Marc;

Romantic Primitivism: Reaction against civilization; Gauguin;

Subconscious Primitivism: Rousseau; **The Child Cult:** Klee, Miro, Dubuffet;

Primitivism in Modern Art: Brancusi, Modigliani, Giacometti Lipchitz, Epstein, Moore, Barbara Hepworth. Rituals and conceptual processes indigenous to Africa, directly and indirectly, influenced **Dada,** Man Ray; **Surrealism** (e.g. subconscious images combined with pictorial abstraction), Dali, Magritte, Giacometti; **Expressionist** and **Abstract Expressionist,** *Sam Gilliam, Richard Hunt;* **Action Painting** and **the non-objective art** of Pollock, Motherwell, and Rothko; **Happening, Environmental Art, Earth Works** and **Installation** by Chrysto, Lewitt, Oldenberg, Dine, *Houston Conwill, Mildred Howard, and Martha Jackson-Jarvis*; **Naif Art** (icons produced by trained artists that resemble icons that are produced by untrained or folk artists), *Faith Ringgold;* and the diverse figurative post-modern sculptural styles by artists such as Nancy Graves.

Afro-centric (Afrecentric or Africentric) Art: Some African-American artists have blended African with European genre to express and interpret the experiences of African American people. These include, **(1920-40)**: *Aaron Douglas, Hale Woodruff, Palmer Hayden, Archibald Motley Jr., Malvin Gray Johnson, Ellis Wilson, Sargent Claude Johnson, Augusta Savage, Richard Barthe, William Henry Johnson, James Jones, Alma Thomas, James A. Porter and William E. Artis;* **(1940-60),** *Charles Alston, Norman Lewis, Romare Bearden, Hughie Lee-Smith, Eldzier Cortor, Jacob Lawrence, Charles White, Elizabeth Catlett, John Wilson and John Biggers;* **(1960-90)** *David Driskell, Benny Andrews, Phoebe Beasley, Faith Ringgold, David Bradford, Betye Saar.*

Naive, Visionary, Intuitive, and Folk Art: *William Edmondson, Horace Pippin, Clementine Hunter, David Bulter,* Grandma Moses.
People who produced works in these styles are by definition "unschooled artists." They were generally unaware of genre in world art. They were motivated more by their religious beliefs, a desire to express or interpret, personal or communal experiences or a need to create, than by financial rewards or recognition from the arts community. Ideas are expressed through genre that were more "absorbed"

than "learned." That is, the artists acquired the iconographic language of their society through subliminal processes and not through formal artistic training.

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